

# **MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY**

2 February, 2015

RE: MI SB 31 and 32 of 2015

Distingisuehd members of the MI Judiciary Committee

A number of studies suggest a link between athletic participation and positive health-related outcomes for adolescents. Of most importance, participation in competitive sports contributes to increased levels of physical activity for adolescents. Moreover, adolescents' participation in competitive sports is associated with a lower risk of engaging in certain types of substance use and a lower risk of being overweight. Participation in competitive sports is also associated with healthier dietary practices. While sports clearly provide a platform for engaging and learning health-sustaining behaviors for adolescents, society, research, and policy have typically overlooked how sports affects sports officials.

In the State of MI, there are approximately 5,000 soccer officials. Of these, approximately one-third are under the age of 18. Some of these officials are youth who also play soccer or other sports, some are youth who are exploring officiating as a profession or a vocation, and many others are youth who officiate because of the financial earnings for their time and contribution to the game.



## **Human Development and Family Studies**

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Sports officials, particularly those who are not skilled athletes but who themselves have a passion for sports, are needed to support recreational and competitive matches. But unlike teams, these officials are often vulnerable to disparaging remarks from players, coaches, and spectators. Officials are often blamed for making decisions that do or do not favor player, coach, and spectators' perceptions of what is (not) fair in sport. A search of YouTube reveals multiple examples of sports officials being berated and physically assaulted by players, team personnel, and spectators for their efforts.

We acknowledge and express our gratitude to Sen. Hood and the Judiciary Committee for considering this legislation. It clearly represents a proactive effort to ensure the safety of sports officials. This prospective legislation also helps to ensure that perpetrators of violence amongst sports officials will be held accountable for their actions regardless of any primary charges for physical assault.

However, the July 2014 tragic death of soccer referee John Bieniewicz is a key reminder of existing shortcomings in MI legislation. Clearly, one death on an athletic field is one death too many. But, we ask if this legislation is too little, too late. Let me give one example. As the State Youth Referee Administrator for Michigan soccer officials, I work with leagues throughout the state. In one league this past fall nearly 2,200 matches were played. While the season was completed without any physical assaults, there were at least nine incidents of

referee verbal abuse that were dealt with at the league level, six of which involved referees that were younger than 18 years of age.

To briefly elaborate this point, let me share three examples of the referee abuse of soccer that occurred during the fall season in one league.

- In one situation, after a player injury, a parent came onto the field to attend to her injured daughter. Before comforting her daughter, who was being attended by a medical trainer, the parent approached the 20-something year old referee and stated: *"There needs to be a second ambulance for you because of what has happened to my daughter. I should kick your ass for what you let happen to my daughter, and I will if you don't get the F\*\*\* away from me"* There were other statements made that were allegedly profane at this time, but neither the coach nor the spouse of this parent intervened. The authority of the referee is limited to players and bench personnel – in other words there was nothing this referee could have done to respond to the parent's comments. After the match, the referee was followed to her vehicle by a parent. The referee took a cell photo of the person's license plate and called police, but the injured player's parents left when they realized the referee was contacting law enforcement. While the incident was reported to the league and to law enforcement, no sanction was imposed because the due process of the team (not the parent) was not followed – in other words, the formal paperwork for a league disciplinary hearing was not filed in a timely manner. Law enforcement spoke with the parent, but there were no serious repercussions for the perpetrator(s) who instilled significant fear in this young, female soccer referee. The referee has decided to stop officiating because she fears that she could be physically victimized in the future. Unfortunately, this was a match that involved youth who were graduating high school players. In other words, neither the team nor the abusing parents were held culpable for their actions
- During the first half of a match involving players younger than 12-years of age, a 16-year old referee was being yelled and cursed at by parents. At one point during the match, she asked the coach of the offending team to control parents – an approach that is consistent with the rules of competition. Parental comments subsided for the first half, but escalated again in the second half. The referee admits that she should have stopped the match and had the offending parents removed – but she was too scared to act. The coach, who rightfully was focused on his players, did not recognize that the parental comments escalated as they were on the opposite side of the field. After completing the match reports, the referee, a 16-year-old female, walked to her car. The parental verbal abuse did not stop. She was followed to her car by one parent in particular, and

upon entering the car, locked the doors in fear that she would be physically assaulted. The parent approached her car and was screaming at her, which she could clearly hear, despite the fact that her windows were closed. She left the complex and called her parents, crying and upset. It took her parents 20 minutes to calm her down before she could drive home. The incident was dealt with at a league disciplinary hearing. The team was found responsible for not controlling their parents and was required to pay a bond to be held for one-year. There is no means for the league to impose a sanction on parents whose actions have caused her to question her willingness to continue to officiate, and in short have resulted in her being scared about returning in the future to officiate again. She has considered quitting because of this event, but as of yet, has not because we have engaged her in multiple conversations in an effort to understand that her actions were not inappropriate, and indeed she had more options

- In a third incident, a 14-year-old official dismissed a coach for unprofessional comments, including cursing at the referee crew. One of the referee crew members was an adult, who stepped up to protect the referee. The coach threatened the adult, and called the young girl out by name further threatening her. While the coach was dismissed from the club for his actions, and the club was sanctioned for the coaches' actions, the coach has been hired by a club in an adjoining community and continues to actively coach games.

To partially illustrate the long-term consequences of the impact of referee verbal abuse, I have submitted with this document a letter from a parent whose daughter was a victim of verbal abuse several years ago. The Committee could benefit from asking state referee associations to collect testimonials such as this to better understand the prevalence of referee verbal assault to strengthen this important legislation.

While these are three examples of situations involving sports officials, they underscore a shortcoming of this legislation – focusing only on physical assault does not address the gateway behavior – verbal abuse and threats. Moreover, it raises the question of whether there should be differential sanctions for referee assault or abuse perpetrated against adults and youth.

We ask the distinguished panel to recognize that the tragic loss of life to the Bieniewicz family was not the first of its kind in the US. MI SB 31 and 32 of 2015 is critical because it holds perpetrators of physical abuse accountable for their actions. But it does not provide any solstice to the Bieniewicz family. Moreover, the incidence of physical assault is significantly less frequent than verbal abuse and threats that sports officials are often subjected to during and after competition. While we do not have an accurate estimate of the prevalence

or incidence of verbal assaults, the incidence of verbal assaults are significantly greater than physical assaults. I assert that to better understand the scope of the issue, the MI Legislature might ask various referee and leagues to provide documentation on the number of reported incidence of verbal abuse and physical assaults that they have to deal with annually so that legislation that increases the safety of game officials can be developed and implemented for the good of the game. Moreover, data on how the prevalence of physical abuse against adults and youth is needed to ensure that all sports referees are appropriately protected.

I thank you for your time, and consideration of these comments, as well as the opportunity to share my verbal comments at the Judiciary Hearing dated 3 February, 2014.

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Dear Francisco,

I recently read an article of new legislation being sponsored by State Senator Morris Hood III to make referee assault a felony punishable by up to 3 years in jail, along with fines. Although, I appreciate that this legislation is being considered, I am concerned that it might not be enough, if it's only considering assault on a referee. If I understand the term "assault" correctly, that means that physical contact between a person and a referee must occur.

If true, it is my opinion that the legislation doesn't go far enough to protect a referee. Having been involved in soccer as a coach, referee and player for 24+ years, I have witnessed several angry confrontations with referees. I have also watched in horror as my daughter, Victoria, was chased from a soccer field by a coach and angry parents following the completion of a game in the fall, 2006. The game was an under 12 girls Michigan State Cup quarter final, my daughter was a young teenager at the time. Prior to this game, she showed a lot of potential and desire to be a good referee.

Victoria and her assistant referees had sufficient experience and qualifications to officiate the game. However, the game didn't proceed to the liking of one of the coaches and as the game went on he began to verbalize his displeasure. He loudly criticized my daughter and the assistant referees, which incited his parents to follow his lead. The coach, parents, grandparents, other family members and supporters of that team said things to my daughter that no father would ever want to hear about their own child.

During the game, I was standing on the fans side of the field watching the game and hearing the obscenities and criticism shouted at my daughter. Concerned about my ability to maintain my composure over the things that were being said about the referees, I had to remove myself from the situation. Upon hearing the final whistle, I saw my daughter sprint towards other referee officials for protection as she was chased by the coach and fans. I also saw other tournament officials run onto the field to stop family members and fans from joining in the onslaught of verbal abuse.

My daughter never recovered from that incident as a referee. Her confidence was decimated and her desire to referee was never the same again. A potentially bright career in refereeing was destroyed by a coach and a few fans in one 70 minute game.

Although no physical assault took place towards my daughter, the words and actions by that coach and their parents did irreparable damage to her psyche. Sadly, the coach continued coaching without any significant repercussions resulting from the incident. I doubt that the coach, family and fans of the team have no idea the long lasting harm that it caused my daughter.

Undoubtedly, these situations occur frequently in all sports, with many of them going unreported by the officials. I think the legislation is a good first step in addressing and preventing the problem, however, I suggest it not be limited to just assault.

I believe that in most cases, verbal abuse can be far more damaging than assault. If these incidents aren't recognized and handled appropriately, the verbal abuse will escalate into more cases of assault.

I'm happy to discuss further, if needed. Thank you for your time and consideration!

Sincerely,

Scott P. Cornell